

Achieving Consistency in Writing across the Curriculum

by Richard Andersen



Buffalo, N.Y., 1912. A student complains that teacher responses to his writing have been inconsistent. The principal subsequently asks 25 teachers in the high school to critique the writing quality of one of the student's essays. Though the teachers are from various subject fields, they all assign, comment on, and grade essays in their courses. The results are eye opening: the 25 critiques vary as much as the teachers' personalities. So do the grades. They range from "A" to "F"; and when two different teachers give the same grade, the reasons differ.

This experiment has been repeated in various forms throughout the last century—sometimes with as many as 500 evaluators and sometimes with the pool of evaluators limited to English teachers. However, the results have been the same: each evaluator has had his or her own

preconceived idea about what constitutes good writing.

Is it possible to establish common standards in writing for all courses in which essays are assigned and, at the same time, not infringe on the integrity of evaluators nor limit the means of expression available to students? This was the goal of a program initiated by the School of Human Services at Springfield College in Massachusetts. The program now includes faculty members from all disciplines and is in place at seven of the college's nine campuses.

Faculty Members: Responding Consistently

In 1998, a committee of writing instructors at the School of Human Services implemented a two-course writing sequence that featured the same course objectives when conducted on any of the college's campuses. The next year, the Springfield College Writing across the Curriculum Committee piloted and published *Reading Writing! How to Evaluate, Edit, and Respond to What Others Have Written* (Andersen and Fraizer 1998), which offers faculty members a range of options for evaluating writing

and responding to student essays. The book also provides suggestions for teaching students how to identify, correct, and avoid repeating their own conventional errors.

The book's across-the-curriculum suggestions for evaluating student papers help professors identify *what* they need to do to improve their students' writing and *how* they need to do it. Among the chapters in the 122-page guide are those that can be read in their entirety ("Having the Write Attitude," "Language Rights and Wrongs"), those that address particular issues ("Responding to Meaning," "Responding to Style"), and those intended strictly for reference ("Responding to the Rules," "Grading What You've Read").

Since *Reading Writing!* has been available to Springfield College's more than 200 faculty members, many instructors have been able to use the guide to address their concerns about student writing and respond in a consistent manner. Having in-common solutions means that students receive similar responses to their writing regardless of the disciplines in which they write.

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Students: Improving Writing

To further the idea in students' minds that the principles of good writing are the same regardless of the discipline, Springfield College makes available to its students *Writing Wrongs! The Springfield College Guide to Clear and Correct Writing* (Andersen and Hinis 1999). While this book primarily reiterates the material in the faculty's *Reading Writing!*, it also discusses and provides techniques for approaching writing as a process. In addition, the student book includes exercises designed to help writers discover, identify, and correct for themselves any conventional errors in their essays.

Focus on Writing Mechanics

Naturally, faculty members focus mainly on the content in their respective disciplines rather than on the writing process. The content is what they know best. With the help of the writing guides, instructors at Springfield College are able to identify errors in the mechanics of writing, such as run-on sentences, fragments, and subject-verb agreement problems. In this way, they can help students improve both the content of their essays and the quality of their writing.

How the Program Works

Here's how the two concurrent approaches to improved student writing align into a single, practical vision. The students learn writing as a process in their writing classes. They then apply what they've learned to the essays they write in other disciplines. The professors in those other

disciplines use the student-sensitive ways they've discovered in *Reading Writing!* to identify the mechanical errors in their students' papers.

The students then look up the errors their professors have identified in *Writing Wrongs!* When they've completed the exercises that accompany whatever problems their professors have cited, the students bring their books to the Academic Success Center on their campus. There, a team of writer-friendly tutors goes over the exercises to make sure that the students know how to recognize and correct the errors their professors have identified.

A Side Bonus

But that's not all. The subject of the grammatical exercises in *Writing Wrongs!* is the history of Springfield College. So, while the students correct run-ons, comma splices, and the like, they also learn about their school's original connection with the YMCA (a training school for administrators), James Naismith's inventing basketball (football coach Amos Alonzo Stagg scored the first point), William Moran's inventing volleyball (originally called "mintonet"), the days Jim Thorpe (all 30 points) and Dwight David Eisenhower (the winning touchdown) came to play football, the summer Knute Rockne coached (1923), the gymnastics team's visit to the White House (Calvin Coolidge was President), the Jacob's Pillow Dance Company (its founder recruited male athletes in 1933 to show the world that men who dance aren't sissies), and the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy (Kennedy thought he

was speaking at the college down the street).

Why It Works

Consistency is not a word that many instructors hold dear. It smacks of administrative control and infringement on academic freedom. The Consistency across the Writing Curriculum program works at the Springfield College School of Human Services because it provides options without imposing any limitations on either students or instructors. Also, the program doesn't require extra effort on the part of faculty members. In their comments on essays, instructors refer students to specific areas in *Writing Wrongs!* Then tutors in the college's Academic Success Centers review the completed exercises to make sure that students don't repeat their errors.

Better Writing Results

An outcomes-assessment measurement implemented at two School of Human Services campuses indicated the program's positive impact. Establishing writing courses with in-common learning objectives, introducing faculty members to different ways of responding to student essays, and providing students with a writing guide and tutors trained to be supportive in their approach to writing not only created consistency in the ways students wrote and instructors evaluated, but the students wrote better and the instructors evaluated more effectively.

References

- Andersen, R., and D. Fraizer. 1998. *Reading writing! How to evaluate, edit, and respond to what others have written*. Springfield, Mass.: Springfield College.
- Andersen, R., and H. Hinis. 1999. *Writing wrongs! The Springfield College guide to clear and correct writing*. Springfield, Mass.: Springfield College.